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NOTHING
to **SYNDICATE:**
*Against the Democracy of Work
& the Work of Democracy*



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You were taken too soon.*

*For copies to distribute, engaging dialogue, hardcore trashtalking,
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the tombs and concrete slabs surrounding it, the death march of capital can give way to totally new pathways for creativity and abundance. But this requires more than a struggle with the current owners of the means of production; it means an antagonism with the logic of production *itself*, and by extension, the version of *ourselves* that this logic has produced. Our task is not to “crowd out” the many post-revolutionary possibilities available by adhering to a blueprint that is hopelessly anchored to *this* world, but to open the door to a new world “in which many worlds fit.”

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As the *false life* of white civil society is torn at the seams, it is to be expected that a wide range of workplaces might be destroyed, abandoned, or completely re-appropriated. *Communization*—the both spontaneous and organized act of creating communal and stateless forms of life—has to be understood as a broadly diffuse and social process, not limited to or prescribed by the nodes of individual workplaces as they evolved under capitalism.

In an economy, different spheres of life—work, play, ritual, family, friendship, creativity, learning—are starkly alienated from one another, and all are typically subordinated to that which best continues to allow the economy to function. This is a state of affairs to be opposed resolutely, and tactics of revolt and forms of organization that allow these spheres to blend back together indistinguishably are to be encouraged.

Put differently: As anarchists, we are not struggling to democratize the state. In the same manner, it needs to be understood that we are not struggling to democratize the economy. Just as we reject the notion of handing the reigns of the state over to a new set of owners, we ought reject any such proposal for the economy. This doesn't mean the dispossessed and exploited will not "lead the way"—they already are—but it does challenge a workplace-centered approach geared towards preserving the economy and production in their currently understood sense.

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"We begin to see how Marxism suffers from a kind of conceptual anxiety. There is a desire for socialism on the other side of crisis, a society that does away not with the category of worker, but with the imposition workers suffer under the approach of variable capital. In other words, the mark of its conceptual anxiety is in its desire to democratize work and thus help to keep in place and ensure the coherence of Reformation and Enlightenment foundational values of productivity and progress. This scenario crowds out other post-revolutionary possibilities, i.e. idleness etc."

-Frank Wilderson, "The Prison Slave as Hegemony's (Silent) Scandal"

"A sickle can be used for something other than to reap, and a hoe can serve to dig the grave for all that has outlived its time."

The Daily CNT, (Spain, January 2, 1933)

"To remember what they had lost and what they became, what had been torn apart and what had come together, the fugitives and refugees and multitudes in flight were called the Sisala, which means 'to come together, to become together, to weave together.'"

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developments, forests, swamps, deserts, reservations, *everywhere*. To state once more, in anticipation of a mountain of misunderstanding: this article is not suggesting that we abandon conflict with our bosses. It is arguing that we *de-center* the workplace as the primary site of such struggle, and that we understand this struggle to be gesturing towards something fundamentally more revolutionary, terrifying, and beautiful than the democratization of the economy. A worker once wrote in a very old, dusty CNT newspaper: "A sickle can be used for something other than to reap, and a hoe can serve to dig the grave for all that has outlived its time."

If this takes us using an informal neighborhood assembly to coordinate a raid on a state armory all led simultaneously by a militia of mechanics, a collective of Quaker clergy, and a platoon of power-line attacking squirrels, *I'm fucking down for that*. Shit may get weird. But that's a better option than privileging one sector of resistance over others, or centralizing a single node or channel of decision-making (i.e. the One Big Union) because that's what our revolutionary blueprint tells us to do.³⁴

34 One might respond that syndicalists are already organizing in a variety of sectors, not just the workplace. This is admirably true, but only more so begs the question why this dated strategy has not updated itself for the 21st century. So often the *activity* of the militant speaks to a reality not yet explicitly recognized by our *ideas*, which remain millstones around our necks.

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fuzzies is both Eurocentric and racist. The sooner we discard the democratic absurdity and develop new language for our visions of individual and collective freedom, the better off we'll be.

Returning to the questions at hand, I admit that the criticisms in this piece attack the question of workers' self-management from very different directions, and harbor internal conflicts with each other. In this sense I am not presenting a singular program, but rather a set of different (but related) problems *fundamental* to the syndicalist project. Frankly, I'm still thinking my way through all these problems and what they mean for the day-to-day struggles of which I'm a part. I'm immediately skeptical of grand, universalizing theories that claim to offer the perfect scientific formula, and am more comfortable in the negative role of (active) pessimist and experimenter.

I am also not proposing a new "site" for attack, to replace the workplaces of old as the *central*, privileged lever at which we will assert revolutionary power. There should be no new "revolutionary subject" to replace the idealized "worker," "peasant," or "lumpen," around which detached middle-class socialists will salivate and spew forth their objectifying projections and predictions.

I believe it is both necessary and to our strategic benefit that any sort of anarchistic social revolution attack our oppression at all points of its reproduction—this still means the workplace, but also the home, the urban neighborhood, the back roads and mountain hollers, schools, suburban

CUE THE GROANS, leap to whatever pre-formed expectations you may have, and swipe left to instead arrive at a far sexier (and far shorter) piece on some racist shitbag getting punched or whatever, cus' you're currently reading a *critique of anarcho-syndicalism*. There's a long history of pieces like this, and most of the time they're dry, demogogical, and philosophically vapid. Get out now! But if you're still with me, I promise there's a kind of timely necessity behind this hesitantly written piece.

The last two years of US social movement activity, since the ascendancy of the Trump candidacy and subsequent backlash among broad sectors of American society, have been a whirlwind of growth and crisis. In this time a huge wave of new faces have found themselves eager to join in the historical moment of occupations, street conflicts, anti-racist community defense, and

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Not unlike the highways and bridges around us, much of the anarchist infrastructure we had built in the mid-2000s—radical bookstores, newspapers, zine distros, social centers, regular assemblies, medic and tech collectives—was too small or in disrepair, ill-prepared to absorb this exponential increase in brand new, un-vouched for, and totally passionate bodies that we were meeting in the streets.

Assemblies in my town, for example, swelled from a couple dozen to nearly two hundred people immediately following Trump’s election. Most of these people had never participated in such an event and held little to no personal or political context for one another. Among many there was a vague desire to organize in an autonomous and non-electoral way, but very little shared experience with how to do so. And at least a few of these new faces were likely informants.

Enter the strictly public-facing and lowest-common denominator politics of more traditional activist organizations. Following this political moment, organizations like the Indivisibles, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), previously nonexistent or peripheral to most combative politics actually happening on the ground, exploded in size. It’s not hard to see how that happened: show up to a meeting, sign a membership card, agree to a remarkably thin level of political

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directly. But while this more direct approach has historically opened up space for broad and meaningful antagonism with the state and capital, it remains conceptually wedded to *democracy*.

In the context of a supposedly anarchist revolution, this implies its own paradox: a democratic body with no central enforcement apparatus (i.e. a state’s monopoly on violence) or *singularly legitimate* decision-making body (again, a state), that rests instead on the premise of autonomy and self-determination of its members, is no democracy at all, but something else entirely. Labeling the structure a “direct” democracy does not resolve this conceptual confusion.³²

It is no coincidence that history’s democratic ancestors (Athens, etc.) were predominantly militarized slave states, and that the central vehicles for white supremacist expansion in North America were democratic in form—this kind of state has historically been adept at military expansion, soliciting consent from privileged but governed majorities, and stabilization in times of crisis.³³ On the other hand, for leftists to retroactively label certain indigenous stateless societies as “democracies” because it gives them the warm diversity-

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While anarchist organizing in our workplaces may have an immediate relevancy in the here and now, in the sense that it helps us meet our short-term needs and opens another site of conflict, it can hardly be the central or sole driver of human organization after a social revolution. TLDR: I have no interest in making the catering industry a democracy. Thanks but no thanks.

In Conclusion

Above all, the critiques in this piece share a deep rejection of the goal of democratizing our economy. They vary from the historically materialist, feminist, and ecological to the anti-racist, ontological, and even “existential.” To be sure, these points of critique could also be aimed at other, more statist versions of the socialist project. And this is just as relevant to an approach that sees syndicalism as a transitional stage—*don’t worry, the One Big Union will wither away on its own, ideally before the sea levels rise much more!*—as opposed to an “endgame” in itself.

A few side notes regarding this project of democratization: If the work of most socialists is to make the economy more democratic *indirectly* through the state (either through totalitarian single-party rule or the farce of elections), the strategy of anarcho-syndicalism has been to bypass the state and do so

affinity with other complete strangers, and you’re *a part of things*.¹

I say all this out of sympathy. As a teenager in a small southern town in the late 90’s, I had a pretty awkward time finding radical and anarchist politics myself. I remember, after attending my very first demonstration, during which a squad of about 30 black-clad punks with golf clubs and hockey sticks attacked a limousine en route to a presidential debate, being desperate to get involved in any way I could.²

I couldn’t find the crazy people with hockey sticks—they were mostly from one town over, and kind of intimidating regardless, even without the hockey sticks—so I walked up to the first table I could find and got chicken-hawk recruited by the ever-timid, incredibly condescending, totally manipulative International Socialist Organization. Fast forward through

1 This essay is not a critique of public-facing or “formal” organizations *per se*. Revolutionary movements need a variety of accessible entry points for new folks, whether that’s a union, a social center, a medic collective, or something else, and the failure of anarchist infrastructure to adequately fill this role in 2016 partly explains the emergence of more reformist groups like DSA. Rather, this piece takes aim at some of the ideological baggage carried by the more prominent leftist organizations currently playing this role.

2 They called it a sports bloc, by the way, and I was thrilled at how instead of being content to just chant slogans against the rich like the rest of us, they actually *did the thing*.

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two years of paternalistic programming where my own experiences of wage work and alienation didn't seem to fit their one-dimensional projections of *the* revolutionary subject, and I was outta there. That's just how shit goes sometimes.

But in our current context, it can be hard to take the time to step back and actually engage in constructive critique of the ideas behind these political ports of entry. Some might argue that the dangerously resurgent fascism and far-right politics we're confronting make it a poor time for obscure internal arguments over revolutionary strategy, but I think history shows this is the *most* necessary time to debate our visions for a different kind of future.

Unfortunately, American radicals in particular are notoriously terrible at authentic, substantive debate; we are a world of endless splits, passive aggressive "cooperation," personal ad hominem attacks, inappropriately weaponized privilege politics, and twitter-shaming. The "best" outcome in this context is often that a kind of big-tent attitude develops where all critique is sidelined—but this merely papers over the contradictions in vision, organization, and tactics that will inevitably emerge in revolutionary struggle. I believe that people with different experiences who want different things can still work to mutually beneficial aims, especially when autonomy and self-determination remain guiding principles, but growth is always limited by inauthenticity.

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way shape or form. I want it gone. I want my time taken up teaching and learning with kids, growing and finding food, cooking and eating with the people and animals I love and whom I depend on to survive. By all means I desire to (and do) struggle alongside my current co-workers around the immediate needs that we have—most of which looks like theft and fudging our hours, given the array of institutional, cultural, and temporal constraints that make aboveground institutionalized organizing difficult in our industry—but no amount of post-revolutionary self-management will make this workplace tolerable. If the rev happens on a Tuesday, I can promise you that we'll be smashing the plates, stealing the silver, and torching the tents by Wednesday morning.

One could argue that our "union" could choose to carry on a different activity than the labor we carried out before the rev—maybe we turn one of the wedding venues we work at into a school or collective housing, for instance—but then it would make more sense to invite in a whole new set of (former) workers with more skills and experience in that field, at which point our "caterers' union" would be a redundancy. And why should our union, constituted by humans somewhat arbitrarily assembled by capitalism, get the final say with what happens at that venue anyway, any more than the other people who live in the area or have immediate needs and visions for how to use the space? Why should the ghost of capitalism be allowed to prescribe the creative and decision-making forms of a new society?

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not there, the way I'm trained to be invisible, the way I'm scolded for eating their food, the way they stare at me with derision when I mix their drinks, the way their backwashed filth feels when I scrape and rack their plates, the way my feet and back and wrists hurt at the end of the shift, the way the black and white uniform is an unspoken reminder of the Plantation, the looks of depression and alcoholism and exhaustion on my friends' and co-workers' faces. And considering that I have a degree of white privilege—and am paid above average for the service sector I'm in—I can only *imagine* the anger and frustration others feel. Nobody who gets free is trying to do this shit one minute longer than we have to, regardless of whether there is a boss or not. And I think that's true for tens of millions of service workers across North America.

This anger and depression is only heightened by the critical awareness that there is simply nothing *necessary* about this work—nothing I do would be needed for any kind of egalitarian society to function. In a decent society parties and weddings (which themselves would be a completely different affair in a stateless and non-patriarchal world) could easily be “run” by the guests and their friends themselves. Only in a society as completely alienated as our own do narcissistic, self-absorbed people pay thousands of dollars to have their most intimate and personally important days attended to by complete strangers who stare at them in barely hidden contempt.

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to some degree. I believe passionately that developing trust and affinity is both possible and absolutely necessary amongst those with differing ideas, but that conflict must be intrinsic to this process. On that note, I'm tremendously thankful to the many who have challenged me (and who continue to do so) in my own political assumptions over the last 20 years.³

TLDR INTRO: This is a partly theoretical and partly personal critique of *syndicalism*, the “movement for transferring the ownership and control of the means of production and distribution to workers' unions.” This idea has a long and inspiring history within (and outside of) anarchism—it has inspired everyone from immigrant miners in Colorado to starving Catalan brick layers to South African laborers, and offers a radical alternative to the pro-capitalist business unionism of groups like the AFL-CIO. It was part of the philosophical backbone of the millions-strong social revolution in 1930's Spain, and, as contemporary Spanish syndicalists admit, also bears some of the responsibility for that revolution's betrayal and failure. And in an oddly anachronistic

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resurgency, syndicalism is a driving force of the IWW, which has grown tremendously in North America in the last two years and been impressively involved in a range of activity, from anti-prison agitation to anti-racist defense and fast food worker organizing.⁴

As anarchists, it is taken for granted that we are struggling to abolish rather than democratize the state. But a strange blindspot continues to exist for many, who frame their efforts as a struggle to democratize (rather than abolish) the economy. As this article demonstrates, this is not a battle over mere semantics; it strikes at the heart of the world(s) we want to share, and what paths we choose to get there.

This piece integrates a number of theoretical perspectives and emphases—anti-state communist, afro-pessimist, ecological, “insurrectionary,” and the personal, to name a few—that are fairly ubiquitous in much anti-authoritarian writing of the last ten years and directly relevant to syndicalist thought, but seem to remain largely unexamined by many of the newest “recruits.” A central shared theme in all these critiques, while they approach the question of workers’ self-management from very different backgrounds and histories,

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we are 150 years later, still living in this “afterlife of slavery.”³¹

The question behind this history, that still approaches us urgently in the 21st century, is: If the democratization of slavery brought us prisons, what will the democratization of the modern economy bring us?

Act IV: Bon Appétit, Asshole

I would add another dimension to the more removed critiques mentioned so far: that of individual desire. These critiques mean nothing if they do not engage dialogically with our own personal experiences of the workplace, democracy, and racialized and gendered labor.

Speaking as someone who has worked in the food industry, and in particular fine dining and the catering industry, for nearly 20 years (with a variety of other wage jobs mixed in), I can barely find the words to express how absolutely disinterested I am in “self-managing” this industry, whether it’s right now or after some kind of worker-led revolution.

I love cooking for and feeding the people I care about.

I hate serving clients. I hate the way their eyes glide over me like I’m

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Ultimately, for all the conflicts that existed between Northern and Southern visions of progress and race relations, the betrayals and economic transitions of the Reconstruction period were *jointly* built upon a deeply held white anxiety towards a Black freedom that reformers (correctly) understood can only mean the end of America.³⁰ Instead, a paper freedom was offered, a right to (sometimes) sit in a voting booth, witness booth, or prison cell, and even this was suffocated by the still unending realities of forced labor and social death. The convict lease system, the restoration of expropriated plantations to their “rightful” owners, the modernization of police forces and penal codes, and the expansion of state prison systems all reflected this: that bondage had not been abolished, but rather democratized. The red and blue lights that periodically flash across the walls of my neighborhood, and the streetfights we find ourselves in with Proud Boys and neo-Klansmen, are equally a reminder of this fact. Here

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Act I: On the Practice of Polishing Green Turds

In a landmark report recently released by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the world’s leading climate scientists warn that there are “only a dozen years for global warming to be kept to a maximum of 1.5C, beyond which even half a degree will significantly worsen the risks of drought, floods, extreme heat and poverty for hundreds of millions of people.”⁵ The report makes clear that only extreme action would have a chance to prevent carbon emissions from pushing us over this 1.5C line. These types of reports are not atypical—it feels like every five years or so a new dire analysis attempts to politely and futilely convince global industrial capitalism to step off the path of its inevitable death march. But this was the most intense warning to date, and comes at a time when many of the world’s major economies, from capitalist

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USA to “communist” China, are particularly inclined to ignore it.

To be frank: the global industrial economy threatens the very existence of human life on this planet. Those who suffer the ecological effects of runaway climate change are, predictably, the poorest, people of color, the indigenous, and quite often the currently or formerly incarcerated. Ecological crises are themselves drivers for further economic stratification, ever more Orwellian forms of state control, and capitalist accumulation. By juxtaposition, it should be obvious that a classless and stateless society in which wealth and resources were held in common—accessible to everyone and owned by no one—would not just result in but *require* a fundamentally different relationship between people and the natural world around us.

Syndicalists, along with many other “classical” anarchists and leftists, have usually offered a woefully inadequate response to environmental problems. It is suggested that, with the unions in charge and the profit motive removed, there will no longer be a structural impetus for environmental destruction. There is a certain logic to this—I can imagine it being a little easier to convince my co-workers to stop polluting in a certain way than my shitty boss who’s beholden to a growth-obsessed economy. A no-growth economy would certainly be better for the earth than our current situation. But what if these pollutants are intrinsically necessary to a certain form of industry? Or, as it stands, to virtually *all* forms of industry? And what if certain kinds of human

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Some might object to the relevancy of all this to a critique of syndicalism, but the historical parallels, in particular at the end of the Civil War, are abundant. When well-intentioned Northern bureaucrats traveled south with “justice” in their mouths, charged with restarting the post-war agrarian economy, their task was clear: By hook or by crook, force former slaves to sign labor contracts with their former masters, who had been restored ownership of their former lands in direct opposition to the slaves who had been occupying them.²⁸ Some laborers signed willingly, some resisted, and others remained marooned as far away as they could.²⁹

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Does a slave rebellion gesture toward the democratization of the plantation, or its destruction? What about a prison riot? The good protesters may defend our “rights” as *prisoners*, but no one is trying to democratically self-manage their prison—they’re trying to burn that shit down and get free.²⁶ As author Saidiya Hartman puts it, “I refuse to believe that the slave’s most capacious political claims or wildest imaginings are for back wages or debt relief. There are too many lives at peril to recycle the forms of appeal that, at

us, “Please, don’t do anything unkind.”

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To give a more precise example: a common industrialist response to the current climate crisis, from opportunistic green capitalists and progressive politicians to the IWW’s own “Environmental Unionism Caucus”, has been to propose a wide range of “alternative” solar and wind power.⁶ But these industries’ technologies are themselves remarkably toxic, difficult or impossible to recycle, and require mining and resource extraction that is highly dangerous to workers and reproduces authoritarian governance all over the world. The problem of solar panel disposal “will explode with full force in two or three decades and wreck the environment” because it “is a huge amount of waste and they are not easy to recycle,” said one Chinese solar official recently. Said another expert in Germany, “Contrary to previous assumptions, pollutants such as lead or carcinogenic cadmium can be almost completely washed out of the fragments of solar modules over a period of several months, for example by rainwater,” making safe disposal almost impossible.⁷ Similar materials (and problems) are required for wind power.

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The specter of ecological colonialism also remains. It is not a coincidence that industrial resource extraction and modern state coercion evolved on the historical stage side by side. Alternative power sources and most industrial machinery and robotics require a constant new supply of heavy metals, much of which must be mined in Africa and the Global South. Do we realistically think that, with the profit motive and state coercion removed from the equation, African laborers will *voluntarily* mine cobalt—an incredibly dangerous and toxic process—to power the cell phones of millions of westerners 10,000 miles away?⁸

One might argue that with the solar and wind industry I'm unfairly choosing a convenient exception to pick on, that the vast majority of industries could be collectivized and self-managed by their current workers with little

8 Adding to this specter of colonialism is the very real fact that the soon-to-be-syndicated workplaces across North America all reside *on stolen land*. I don't know what native folks will want to do if the rev pops off—I suspect they'll have a lot of different ideas about it—but if many of them want to remove large parts of their land from the industrial and economic paradigm, it would be a colonialist and counter-revolutionary act for a union to stand in their way, self-management be damned.

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24 A last note on civil society: A few years ago, during a daytime lull in the anti-police uprising in a nearby city, me and my exhausted, tear-gas-drenched friends were loading up cases of water in the trunk of our car. A well-dressed woman exiting a Starbucks approached us with a mix of fear and genuine concern, begging

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Act III: Burning Down the American Plantation

To observe these *facts* of 21st century resistance outside of, beyond, and against the workplace is not to express unqualified validation or universal approval of these movement spaces. Within every encampment, every prison strike noise demo, every highway takeover, every airport occupation, and every open assembly, there remains a multitude of fault lines, all of which pass through the central, racialized contradiction that is *civil society*.

Critical theorist Frank Wilderson writes, "There is something organic to the Black positionality that makes it essential to the destruction of civil society." This can be thought of through the lens of one's relation to the economy and work:

The worker demands that productivity be fair and democratic (Gramsci's new hegemony, Lenin's dictatorship

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modification required to have them run in an environmentally sustainable manner. But does anyone actually believe that? That the economy that gave us nuclear bombs, PVC, DDT, superfund sites, and Miracle Whip just needs a little green, self-managed tinkering and everything can keep on humming like normal? And if we don't believe that, then how does a predominantly syndicalist strategy for social revolution—in which unions take power from bosses and continue to run all these workplaces for society's benefit—make sense?⁹ If we're honest about the ecological need to close, destroy, or totally re-structure the vast majority of the economy's workplaces, is a syndicalist strategy for revolution, in which workplaces are privileged as the *primary* drivers for transitions in power and self-governance, the best option?

A common, usually defensive response to this ecological critique has been to accuse the author of advocating a pre-industrial Stone Age, a kind of Hobbesian hunter-and-gatherer existence where everyone dies a miserable death with no penicillin and no teeth at the ripe old age of 40.¹⁰ But this a

⁹ The ecologically disastrous paths of the USSR and China are also an alarm bell worth ringing. Though rank and file workers hardly had (or have) more power in these societies than in the US, the warning signs of a bureaucratic and production-obsessed economy ring true.

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modification required to have them run in an environmentally sustainable manner. But does anyone actually believe that? That the economy that gave us nuclear bombs, PVC, DDT, superfund sites, and Miracle Whip just needs a little green, self-managed tinkering and everything can keep on humming like normal? And if we don't believe that, then how does a predominantly syndicalist strategy for social revolution—in which unions take power from bosses and continue to run all these workplaces for society's benefit—make sense?⁹ If we're honest about the ecological need to close, destroy, or totally re-structure the vast majority of the economy's workplaces, is a syndicalist strategy for revolution, in which workplaces are privileged as the *primary* drivers for transitions in power and self-governance, the best option?

A common, usually defensive response to this ecological critique has been to accuse the author of advocating a pre-industrial Stone Age, a kind of Hobbesian hunter-and-gatherer existence where everyone dies a miserable death with no penicillin and no teeth at the ripe old age of 40.¹⁰ But this a

⁹ The ecologically disastrous paths of the USSR and China are also an alarm bell worth ringing. Though rank and file workers hardly had (or have) more power in these societies than in the US, the warning signs of a bureaucratic and production-obsessed economy ring true.

¹⁰ That being said, won't it be remarkable to live in a world where industry hasn't destroyed so much of the natural world that living by hunting, fishing, and sustainable small-scale agriculture *is possible* again? Shouldn't that be a goal? If

remarkably false dichotomy that I think most readers can see through. A post-revolutionary world will likely look like nothing we can currently imagine, past or present—it might incorporate formerly industrial technologies in non-industrial ways, it may be a world where much work and labor is being done with no “workplaces” or “economy” whatsoever, and it will probably look radically different from one bioregion to the next¹¹—but it cannot look like a rehashed, worker-managed version of *this world*, or that car is going to drive off of that cliff.

Act II: Precaricats, Robots, and the Universal Wage

As Peter Gelderloos points out in an article released after Trump’s election, “The corporate architects of the new economy, like Google, Apple, and Facebook, may be the only hope for capitalism to survive the ecological and financial crises it has created. Economic growth based on fossil fuels and manufacture,

someone offered me a trade where I could sit at a lake catching my dinner instead of checking fedbook every ten minutes, I’d take that shit in a minute.

II Nevertheless, the imagination is a fun place to start! For an exploration of this theme, check out *Post-Civ!* published by Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness. I’d also suggest writings from the ZAD in France.

world is reproduced, which is *everywhere*—but it’s no wonder that a strategy which centrally privileges the workplace as the primary site of counter-power feels bizarrely out of date and hopelessly inadequate.

Many North American anarchists work in a service sectors that are still vulnerable to self-organized worker-driven resistance. There remains enough of a bourgeois desire to “be served,” and psychological barrier to experiencing that service from a robot, that we still have these jobs for the time being. A lot of these employers are smaller and have less access to variable capital, and so myriad opportunities to undermine their credibility with the public and sabotage their profits still exist.

But even when social conflict does erupt on the job, the material shifts laid out in this section suggest a radical change in *how* we organize at (and against) work. The union, as it is traditionally understood, is a calcified fossil that evolved in a very different time period—perhaps it can be dusted off and reinvented, but it will never again be the primary driver of revolutionary change. From mutual aid networks and non-workplace-based assemblies to neighborhood pickets and 21st-century relevant forms of cyber and industrial sabotage, we need a newly diversified toolbox to attack this era of capitalism.²²

22 The 2018 West Virginia teachers’ strike offered an inspiring example of this, in particular in the massive networks of mutual aid that emerged, and the willingness of at least some teachers to organize in direct opposition to union

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this is *not* an argument “against organization,” but in favor of *more* organization that is flexible, autonomous, localized, efficient, and responsive to immediate practical needs rather than theoretical positions, egotistic personalities, or bureaucratic machinations.²¹

The mainstream press and sociologists have explained the diverse and diffuse nature of contemporary protest simply as the product of new “social media,” while socialist cadre groups dismiss this dynamic as a sign of “political immaturity.” These are both lazy explanations that fail to take into account a whole array of material and cultural shifts in the last 50 years, not to mention the conscious choice of radicals to avoid the well-charted mistakes of the past.

It should be clear what all these changes in the nature of work mean for syndicalism: *It is difficult to organize the workplace if there is no workplace. It is even harder if there are no workers.* Of course, there still are workplaces, and we are (mostly) still workers, and people have been organizing at their jobs however we (still) can. This should continue as long as these conditions of work remain—we should be organizing and rebelling in every place in which this

²¹ The Invisible Committee once wrote, “We just have to keep in mind that nothing different can come out of an assembly than what is already there.” So many times people join an organization because that is how they think things *happen*. But no formation, regardless of how “perfect” its structure, will prove powerful if the *individuals* present fail to bring initiative, care, daring, creativity, and mutual trust.

followed by financial bubbles, has had a three hundred year run and it might be meeting its geological limits. Of all the capitalists, only those of the IT sector are ideating game-changing transformations to this dynamic, and developing the technologies to make them feasible, from ethereal production to AI to extraterrestrial exploitation.”¹²

A few readily identifiable shifts in the life of North America’s working class(es) are important in this part of the conversation. First, many sectors of this class that might have once worked one steady, relatively well paying job for decades no longer have that “privilege.” Though racial and gender hierarchies among wage workers remain more entrenched than ever, the reality of 2, 3, 4, or even 6-income households, as a necessity for survival, are a fact of life not just for the most marginalized but for most of us.¹³ A variety of neoliberal shifts in monetary policy, the globalization of production and labor markets, the explosion of the prison-industrial complex, and the transition to a service economy all played a role in this. A drastic loss of unions—down now to around

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11 percent of the private economy—played a role too, but this was far more the result than the cause of these changes.

And it's not just that we're all working a weird handful of precarious part-time jobs. We're working *all the time*, even when we're not at work: creating ad revenue for Facebook, logging into our work app to get more hours, answering emails while on "vacation," cooking rushed meals for our kids between shifts, fixing shit our landlord won't repair, selling our own identities on Instagram and Etsy, spinning the millennials' mousewheel in a desperate effort to turn social capital into actual capital. We're supposed to be fighting back against our bosses, but it can be difficult to even pinpoint *who exactly our boss is*, if it's not just the economy itself.

Of course, understanding work only through the lens of the union, the workplace, and the wage has usually meant leaving more than half the population out of the equation. As feminist theorists like Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Silvia Federici, and Selma James pointed out years ago, understanding unwaged labor, like housework, as work that is intrinsic to the "reproduction of labor" requires us to completely reframe our ideas about anti-capitalist resistance, not just in theory but in practical terms of *where resistance takes place* and how that resistance is *seen* (or not). To take seriously the resistance of those who engage in feminized labor—whether it's paid or not, or performed by men or women— in part requires that we decenter the workplace as the sole or

complicated venn diagram of coordination and contradiction. None of the recent examples of struggle given here relied primarily on a singular, unified mass organization.¹⁹

While movements still need to provide clear entry points to new would-be insurgents, it is no longer "One Big Union" that holds sway in these moments, but the multitudinous interactions of a thousand collectives, affinity groups, gangs, crews, projects, assemblies, spokescouncils, and smaller organizations. This does not make us weaker—it makes us stronger!—and anachronistic efforts at uniting everyone behind one single organization are destined to be either bureaucratic, recuperative, or fail entirely.²⁰ We do need open and overlapping spaces of coordination between these diverse structures and efforts; we do not need a forced or superficial unification. And to be clear,

¹⁹ The IWW's Incarcerated Organizing Committee (IWOC) was important to both the 2016 and 2018 strikes, but its role has been exaggerated by media, which latched onto the most apparent, legible organization it could find to explain a movement it did not understand. The actual organizing for the strike depended on IWOC agitation but also a wide array of already existent prisoner study groups, gangs, prisoner publications, and collectives and affinity groups on the outside. A look at where strike participation popped off is illustrative: in many of the "hottest" facilities, there were few if any IWOC members at all.

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The reason for this tactical and strategic shift has not primarily been ideological but *practical*. It's not because all these people have something fundamentally "against" organizing at work, or love their jobs, or whatever. *It is the world we live in*.

We are also no longer living in the modernist era of the "big organization." The large, bureaucratic, and corporately structured bodies which characterized resistance in the first half of the 20th century are either gone or hold little of the relevance and power they once did. Social movements of the 21st century, at least in their autonomous and radical expression, are necessarily an infinitely

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primary site of struggle.¹⁴ And because so many forms of unwaged, feminized labor are racialized as well as gendered in specific ways, refusing to decenter the workplace in our understanding becomes an act of whitewashing class struggle. As workplaces continue to become ever more diffuse and decentralized anyway, the observations of these feminists become more poignant than ever.

Roboticization and AI threaten to speed up these changes even more. For all of Trump's racist dog whistling about immigrants, it's Chappie and Wall-E that are "taking jobs," not undocumented folks, an obvious fact that both Republicans and Democrats find convenient to ignore. The neoliberal economic shifts that we rioted against in the late 90's and early 00's—alongside squatters in Prague, Mayans in southern Mexico, and steelworkers in Seattle—met effective, widespread resistance and also have a certain built-in limit: once capital is fully free to roam the globe, labor prices can only get so much lower.

Robotics and AI solve that problem and help capitalists re-localize production: no need to move a factory to Singapore if you can pay computers absolutely nothing to do the work right at home. This isn't just a manufacturing phenomenon either, as we were once assured. The service economy is starting to prove successful with this too, as worker-less Amazon Go! stores well

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Gelderloos again: “On the other hand, AI and robotics threaten the social contract by undermining the historic point of unity between the capitalist logic of accumulation and the statist logic of social control: control people and profit off of them by putting them to work. Any solution to that crisis would require bold interventions by the State approaching some kind of utopian yet corporate socialism (a prediction that was already made in 2009¹⁶, that socialism would not result from the development of productive capacities, as Marx foretold, but rather repressive capacities, once the State had the techniques to surveill and control those who were no longer kept in line by the threat of hunger).”

This “corporate socialism” is part leftist utopia, part techie-capitalist scheme. For example, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos has been a loud voice for the universal basic income, a guaranteed salary provided to all by the state regardless of employment, but undoubtedly tied to a whole range of bureaucratic measurements and citizenship standards.¹⁷ In other words, an

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What does all this mean? For one, it helps explain why the most advanced, militant, and widespread resistance to state, capital, whiteness, and citizenship of the last 20 years has mostly occurred *outside the workplace*. This is true from the caracoles of the Zapatistas and the accompanying “anti-globalization” movement, to Occupy, to the organizing and sub/urban riots of Black Lives Matter, to Standing Rock, to the prison strikes¹⁸ of 2016 and 2018, to #OccupyICE, and beyond.

It also helps explain why so many of our creative tactical adaptations of late have focused on sabotaging capitalism at the points of *circulation* and *extraction* (think highway blockades, die-ins at malls, mass looting and burning, expelling police from neighborhoods, the occupation of airports and plazas, blocking rural access points for mining or pipelines), rather than at the point

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